“Sita and Phoolan”: The Good,and The Evil in Hindi Films(1913…2025).

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Abstract: The journey of women actors in hindi film industry is far from being satisfactory. Since its inception, women actors are being subjected to patriarchal diktats and societal expectations. They are usually treated as mere adornments of male leads. Women antagonists are rarely held in high esteem.This paper endeavours to find out whether post modern hindi films are successful in getting over this archaic outlook.

The trajectory of female actors in Indian movies as a whole, is not a linear one. In fact, their journey commences quite late. The first Indian movie 'Raja Harishchandra'(1913) uses male actors in female roles. Till the early phase of the twentieth century, patriarchal constraints and societal reservations debarred Indian women of noble background from stepping into film arena. And when Indian women did enter, they had to remain contented with roles based on Indian mythology ,religion and folk tales which underscore selfless love, sacrifice, piety and chastity of Indian women. Movies like ' Satyaban Sabitri'(1914),' Lankadahan' (1917)"Dhruva

Charitra"(1921)" Patibhakti "(1922)are products of such constricted mentality.

Within this claustrophobic format, which continued till late thirties, the portrayal of a female character, rational, independent, and not subservient to societal expectations was simply inconcievable .Even when a particular film demanded an action scene, Anglo Indian or foreign women of low breed were the first choice. In fact,Nadira is the first action queen in hindi film industry. Her film 'Hunterwali,', makes her a star, though in a negative way.

Gradually, hindi and other regional films graduate to maturity and start focusing on social movies like Achyut' Kanya', 'Jeevan Naiya,' 'Andaz'. Women from liberal, educated background, like Devika Rani ,Durga Khote ,Leela Chitnis appear in leading roles and deliver with elan and ease,a gratifying mix of songs , dance and romance. Concept of a negative character remain confined to cunning mother in laws, conspiring sister in laws etc.

Magnificent changes in hindi film making can be perceived as early as 1951 when Guru Dutt's 'Bazi' was released followed by 'Jaal' 'Aar Paar' 'C.I.D', MR.andMrs 55','Howrah Bridge', ' Twelve'o clock' etc. These ,film noir inspired, crime movies augur a paradigm shift by introducing urban , cosmopolitan backdrop, stupendous use of light and shade, evocative use of imageries, and finally female crime operators. However, such negative characters are being shown belonging to the lower rungs of the society . They earn their livelihood as bar dancers ,fisher women ,petty singers .Their ethereal beauty, titillating dance performances., and deep love though steal hearts of the protagonists, yet cannot put them on the same pedestal of reverence as adorned by female leads, imprisoned in predictable roles.And this tradition of discrimination towards the so-called bad women (femme fatales),the tradition of relegating them to a secondary position continues unhindered. For example, in film

C.I.D., underworld operator Waheeda Rehaman inspite of her stunning beauty and emotional commitment to hero Dev Anand ,moves willingly towards extinction, leaving female lead(Shakila),icon of high moral virtues like Sita, to take over.

Hindi films made in late1970s and 1980s undergo poignant modifications. Leading actresses like Hema Malini, Jeenat Aman, Parveen Babi , no longer cling to formulaic roles inscribed by film makers.They willingly put on the hats of femme fatales ,and ,along with legendary male leads like Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna, Dharmendra dominate the screen space as anti heroines. In film 'Sholay',(1975)Hema Malini, a tangawali on friendly terms with Amitabh Bachhan and Dharmendra, two small crooks, ultimately falls in love with the former. Later. she actively supports them in their fight against the notorious dacoit 'Gabbar Singh'. Similarly, in film 'Don',(1978) notorious mafia don Vijay(Amitabh Bachhan) meets his sworn enemy in 'Roma'. (Zeenat Aman), a member of his own underworld gang. Later Roma comes to know the real identity of Vijay, falls in love and extends unflinching support to Vijay in his fight against police and the real Don .Film.' Deewar',(1978) another anti hero film with its unique content, power- packed acting by both Amitabh Bachchan and Parveen Babi, emerges as a milestone in the history of Bollywood industry. Interestingly,Hema , Zeenat and Parveen Babi's brilliant acting accompanied by sizzling dance numbers in these movies give traditional femme fatales a run for their money, much to the admiration of viewers, who with open arms ,welcome this new genre of heroines. Now the traditional demarcation line between the Good (Sita) and the Bad (Gita) gets blurred with the passage of time.

From last lap of the1990s,a no. of female actors ,free from the shadow of stereotypical conspiring mother inlaws, item dancers, and vivacious stooges of male villains, perform as leading ladies in

unique negative films like Aitraz(2004) ,Jism(2003) Gulabi Gang Mrityudand, Gupt, Kahani,(2012) Andha Dhoon, Sat khoon Maaf,(2011) etc. Some of these films deal with women empowerment, some about a woman's metamorphosis from a docile character to a deadly killer. The core philosophy behind the construction of a female antagonist in Indian cinema is that no one is born evil, only circumstances make them evil. Rape, molestation, poverty, betrayal are usual catalysts that convert women into avengers .(Raj and Suresh,2023) However in most cases ,they cannot come out of personal realm to operate for a bigger issue(Punathambaker,2013.)

Latest Bollywood Super hero centric hits like Race,(1,2) Company Krrish(2,3) Dhoom(1,2,3), are weird concoctions of traditional and modern components. While blatantly emulating Hollywood plots, picturesque foreign locations, high-tech action sequences, introducing body liscious hotties, wearing skimpy clothes, these movies do not go against the formulaic notion of masculine superiority in the end. Superstars like Aishwarya Rai, Kareena Kapoor Katrina Kaif Bipasha Basu, Kangana Ranaut principal female leads ,who willingly slip into negative characters (crime operators), discarding all good qualities of Sita, the classical heroine,to accentuate the reality that as products of 21st century they are ready to embrace modernity along with its all grey shades and no moral hiccups.Yet , they too have to adhere to this patriarchal constrictions, in spite of their spectacular acting prowess.

In film ,'Dhoom 2', 'Sunheri' ,the principal female lead(Aishwarya Rai) is a smart, sleek crook like Mr.'A', Hrrithik Roshan ,the protagonist. Well versed in mechanisms of the underworld , armed with razor sharp intellect, proficiency in handling modern weapons and technology, enviable capabilities in performing daring action sequences , she is an equal match for her male counterpart Mr.'A'. Still, she happily performs searing dance

numbers, pursuing the legacy of archaic item song dancers (Helen Bindu, Aruna Irani) to win over hero Mr. 'A' .And in the end,' Sunheri' succumbs to her secret love for 'A' and prefers to be an arm candy than a tough contender. A stereotypical end which ensures the victory of patriarchy. There is no denial that such postmodern crime action films are mere stale hybrid products . A smart move by the Bollywood film makers to juxtapose the tradition of cultural superiority of India on the West, much to the satisfaction of the Indian diaspora.(Wright,2013).

Movies like' Bandit Queen'(1994), 'God Mother'(1999),'Supari'(2003) Shabri(2011)' ' Haseena Parker'(2017) and 'Gangubai Kathiawadi'(2022) may be pondered as antithesis of the above. They unwind stories of female crimesters , who, in real life, operate and thrive on Indian soil. The film 'Bandit Queen'by Sekhar Kapoor, is a gory narrative of the life of notorious bandit Phulan Devi ,a victim of abysmal poverty, child marriage, and horrific gang- rapes by upper caste Thakurs. Phoolan refuses to cohabit with the traditional notion that a woman is always an object of lust and contempt. She prepares herself to take revenge and gradually evolves into a dreaded dacoit herself .She with her own gang ,out shines other gangs in terms of brutality and ruthless killings. There is no denial that Phulan (played by Seema Choudhary) is the sole protagonist of this movie. Her macabre revenge killings might have shocked the civilized world, but turns her into a Robin Hood type of figure, a messiah for oppressed marginals of rural India.For the first time perhaps, a female outlaw emerges as an embodiment of inspiration, though in a non conformist manner, for all victims of injustice. In real life,Phoolan ultimately surrenders to the State and later becomes an M.P. The film sends shock waves as it unfolds the tragic life of a woman who has to go through devastating experiences for no fault of hers.

Film 'Godmother'(1999) based on life story of mafia queen Santokben Jadeja of Porbandar , Gujrat , depicts how the murder of Santokben's husband, a small criminal, catapults Santokben (Shabana Azmi or Rambi in the movie),a helpless, shy, home maker into a filthy world of bloody violence . Gradually her incredulous ascent to power, through extortion, murder, physical abuse , drug dealings, may make her a notorious mafia queen, but also an unassailable matriarch, an icon of refuge, trust,and sustenance for her caste and gang members, In his essay 'Indian cinema as a slum's Eye view of Poltics ', Prof Ashish Nandy cites and interesting formulation "The legitimacy of popular cinema is based on a similar set of equations . Such cinema is both a romantic attempt to reconstitute an increasingly imaginary village and a dialogue with the compacted heterogeneity of urban industrial India".(Nandy,1999).

In her review of this movie, critic Madhu Kishwar opines that caste as an agent determines access to channels of power in modern urban sector .Caste affiliation provides a source of belonging and acceptance in a city setting that primarily adheres to code of individuality and anonymity. A particular community or caste identity provides a readymade constituency behind it . Caste provides perfect foundation for building political power.(M. Kishwar ,2020)

Movie 'Hasseena Parker,(2017), a powerful commentary on meteoric rise of Haseena, sister of notorious mafia don Dayood Ibrahim of Mumbai. After the flight of Dayood to Dubai in 1993 because of the terrible Bombay blast, Haseena was assigned the task of leading her brother's vast underworld empire. Haseena emerges as a formidable mafia queen, though a respected (Apa) or elder sister , a benefactor for members of her religious community and gang.

Film Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022) portrays allegedly true life story of Gangubai ,an upper caste, young

innocent girl from Gujarat, who was betrayed and sold into prostitution by her own lover. While going through brutal physical and mental assaults, ràpe, betrayals, Gangubai ultimately learns the rules of survival ,and makes kamthapura brothel in Mumbai as her epicentre of power. Parallely she fights relentlessly for basic rights ànd dignity of her colleagues.

It is interesting to state that trajectory of Phulan, Santokben and Gangubai culminates in weird twists . These three ignominious characters, victims of societal contempt, are offered opportunities to enter into Indian politics as M.P.s or M.L.As. There is no denial that these three crime operators appear to be darlings of political parties, as they enjoy immense social clout, built up on liberal distribution of benefits to voteries , representing specific caste andcommunities.The fear of anonymity , extinction and compulsion to get the stamp of legality on their sprawling empire, turn these out laws into adherents of the state. They now become new avatars of social prestige and influence.

Caste and community politics is now the most potent force in post modern India. Electoral calculations for expanding vote bank enthuses political parties to compromise and accommodate all tainted candidates ,who must have absolute impact on respective caste and communities . The movie 'Revolver Rani', which shows Kangana Ranaut (Alaka Singh)the antagonist, as both a gangster and a political leader, is a glaring example of the state of Indian politics today. Thus, at the end of the day the State is more than willing to appropriate their social followings to further it's own interest. And shorn of their entity , Phoolan, Rambi, or Gangubai all now stand as hapless collaborators of a state and society rotten to the core.

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